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Russian Exceptionalism: a Comparative Perspective

Brendan Humphreys

Abstract: *This article seeks to define a certain form of exceptionalism – missionist exceptionalism – and ask to what extent it applies to Russia. The method will be a broad comparative analysis. The core argument is that missionist exceptionalism is fundamentally paradoxical; that polities make largely similar claims about themselves while pleading sui generis uniqueness. This hypothesis is asserted by examining the exceptionalism of other polities. These are two rivals of Russia; the United States and Poland, a "sentimental ally" of Russia, Serbia, and a country with a deep and interesting relationship with Russia, Israel.*

Keywords: ***exceptionalism, missionism, victimhood, civic religion, sacred***

Introduction

With his written address to the American people (New York Times, September 12, 2013) Russian President Vladimir Putin provoked much debate. One aspect was of his letter was of compelling interest; Putin's denial of Russian exceptionalism, and his rebuke of President Obama's exceptionalist claims for the United States. It is generally naïve to take political leaders at their word, but there might be some historical significance in the claim of a Russian leader that Russia was just another country. Much Russian (and later Soviet) historical experience was predicated on the opposite argument, that Russia was unique in the world.

Exceptionalism has several meanings and one in particular will be examined here. At the international level, all polities and cultures can claim some degree of uniqueness or particularism. There is nothing too controversial in such assertions, our cultures differ from each other, our countries and political circumstances are all conditional on location; famously it is said that "all politics are local". Like all generalizations, it is oversimplified but there is nonetheless something in it. Two examples of exceptionalist claims – the assertion that unique circumstances apply and therefore ordinary rules do *not* apply – are the Irish party Sinn Fein and post-Dayton Bosnia. People have complained that Sinn Fein was judged by different standards and it got away with much that other parties in the British Isles could not. The term exceptionalism has also been used to describe the highly unique political structure

that exists in Bosnia Herzegovina – the fact of two entities existing with one federal framework, and the multiple political offices and ministries and so on. In both cases the term exceptionalism is justified.

For this paper we need to move beyond this definition and identify a more specific phenomenon. I propose to call this *missionist exceptionalism*. What is meant by this is a sense that a certain country is felt by its power elite – and probably many of its population – to have a unique place in the world, a distinct *role* to play, and importantly, due to the gravitas of this role, ordinary restraints – such as the rule of law – do *not* apply. Indeed few countries have had such a sense of *role* as Russia: no question has resonated through Russian social thought as much as Что делать? "What is to be done?" The missionist assumption is that something *must* be done. Missionist exceptionalism in this sense is more than simple nationalism, and goes a long way to resembling millennialism, but without its full religious literalism. Certainly when one examines exceptionalism historically, one see consistently religious/civilizational assertions at its core, but in the contemporary world, these assertions are expressed in more legal/rational language. In that sense what we are dealing with can be formalized as *nationalism plus* and *millennialism minus*. In this aspect, it problematizes that sacred/secular dichotomy to a high degree, see below.

Furthermore it is useful to assert that missionist exceptionalism is less concerned with domestic policies and arrangement; it is rather international and relational, it exists *viv-a-vis* rival cultures and polities. To proceed, we can look at exceptionalist patterns in several countries and encounter a large paradox; that despite claims of uniqueness, most of the assertions of missionist exceptionalism are in fact repeated across the different polities make the assertions. They resemble each other to a large degree. If fact it is not too much to say that – from a sufficient critical distance – missionist exceptionalist claims are Macluhan: the claim *is* the message, the contents – allowing for local variations – are often generally familiar.

In addition to Russia, four other countries will be sketched here, although interestingly each has a distinct relationship with Russia. One is a traditional rival, the United States, one a country that has fascinating relationship with Russia, Israel,[1] and two fellow Slavonic counties, Serbia and (only to a

[11] "…it was the Soviet Union that held a special fascination for us – both as the country of origin of most of the Jews then in Palestine…the Russian influence of the evolving ethos of Jewish Palestine was profound". So wrote Shimon Peres in his memoir *Battling for Peace* (1995). Peres was born in Imperial Russia, as were nearly all of Israel's foundational leaders; Chaim Weizmann, David Ben Gurion, Golda Meir, and Moshe Sharett. It would be only a slight exaggeration to say that Israel is a Russian invention; some early Zionists, including Hertz himself, were willing to accept the British offer of

limited but instructive extent) Poland, which unlike mainly-Orthodox Serbia, has a history of rivalry with Russia.

Holy Russia

Both insiders and outsiders have made large claims about Russia being a unique culture. We can define these assertions as *auto-exceptionalist* and *hetro-exceptionalist* claims. To offer examples of both, "One Russian will know another Russian from I know not what distance. A hundred miles perhaps." So said Nabokov to his biographer Andrew Field (Field 1986, 374). "Russian ideas are the most exhilarating, Russian thought the freest, Russian art the most exuberant; Russian food and drink are to me the best, and Russians themselves are, perhaps, the most interesting human beings that exist", so wrote John Reed in his War in Eastern Europe, Travels in the Balkans in 1915 (Reed 1915, 103) Both of these statements do make claims to exceptionalism without being missionistic (or political) as such, although both authors had pronounced political views, deeply reactionary in one case, revolutionary in the other (Reed was, of course, best known for his enthusiastic reporting of the October Revolution, Ten Days that Shook the World). There are, of course, a contrary set of generalizations that single Russia out in a highly negative way. In an interview with Philip Roth, Milan Kundera argued that all the great movements of modern Europe, from Reformation to Enlightenment and beyond had no impression on Russia.

> As a concept of cultural history, Eastern Europe is Russia, with its quite specific history anchored in the Byzantine world. Bohemia, Poland, Hungary, just like Austria have never been part of Easter Europe. From the very beginning, they have taken part in the great adventure of Western civilization, with its Gothic, its Renaissance, its Reformation – a movement that had its cradle precisely in this region….The post war annexation of Central Europe (or at least its major part) by Russian civilization caused Western culture to lose its vital center of gravity. It is the most significant events in the history of the West in our century (quoted in Roth 2001, 91-92).

Uganda as a Jewish homeland. It was only the intervention of the Russian Zionists – including Weizmann – that rejected the offer and insisted on Palestine. It may seem strange, given the later alignment of the Cold War, but the first country to recognize Israel was the USSR. Israel has a large recently Russian population and several of its politicians such as Natan Sharansky and Avigdor Lieberman are ex-Soviet citizens and dissidents.

Such hetro views – and many less sophisticated variations – have been articulated by such influential figures as Richard Pipes and Zbigniew Brzezinski. The less sophisticated views were often comical; during the early Cold War, Soviet aggression was even "explained" on the basis of the tight swaddling clothes that Russian babies had to wear!

Scholars such as Maria Engström and Peter Duncan have examined the religious origins of Russian auto-exceptionalism. Duncan has written on the doctrine of The Third Rome. Engström has recently published on the idea of *Katechon* (from the Greek *ὁ Κατέχων*, 'the withholding', in effect, defense) and how this has recently guided assertive Russian foreign policy (Duncan 2000, Engström 2014). However there is always a high risk of literalism when trying to trace the actual influence of an idea, especially a religious one: do people literally believe this and – if they are in a position of political influence – do they really allow it to guide their actions? Or do they just use religiosity to legitimize or make more respectable their policies? This is hard to measure; do many Jews, a geographically diverse group living in numerous countries of varying degrees of secularism, really believe they belong to a divinely "chosen" people? Or do many Serbs believe literally in Heavenly Serbia, or Poles in Poland as the Christ Among Nations? Even if not, what such ideas do offer is an interpretative framework though which people(s) can interpret their collective historical experience. This is even more heightened if the historical experience is – as in the cases mentioned here – traumatic.

What is interesting about Russian auto-exceptionalism is that it went from an openly religious idea – messianism – to being radically translated into secular terms over a tiny period of time, following the October Revolution. Holy Russia suddenly became – at least until Stalin came to power and Socialism in one Country became official doctrine – the fulcrum of world revolution. Squaring this circle took considerable invention. For an overview of this huge modernisation shift, see Richard Stites' Revolutionary Dreams.

Heavenly Serbia

Taken at its most literal, Serbia's most ambitious claims about itself are that Serbs are a heavenly people, whose sacrifice at the Battle of Kosovo Polje (1389) gave them a permanent place in heaven. Additionally, much of Serbs' history have offered evidence of great sacrifice, including during both World Wars, and this have reinforced a national narrative with a high degree of victimhood. The Serbian novelist (and sometime politician) Dobrica Cosic has made the following claim:

> ...almost every [Serbian] generation had its Kosovo. Such were the migrations of the XVII and XVIII centuries, the insurrections and wars against the Turks in 1804, 1815, 1876, and 1912, and the rejection of the Austro-Hungarian ultimatum in 1914; the rejection of the military defeat in 1915 and the crossing of Albania by the Serbian army; the rejection of the Tripartite pact with Germany on March 27, 1941; the insurrection against fascism in 1941, and the conduct of war under German conditions of retribution; a hundred Serbs for every German soldier; the rejection of Stalin's hegemony in 1948…(quoted in Vujacic 2004, 3*)*

There are also hetro views on heavenly Serbia. One example is Branimir Anzulovic's book *Heavenly Serbia, from Myth to Genocide*, a sustained exercise in negative exceptionalism, which argues loudly that Serbs have a propensity for genocide because of their cult of the Battle of Kosovo Polje. Other examinations of the Kosovo cult, argue that its legacy is mixed; it has offered continuity and cohesion to Serbs under Ottoman rule, and it inspires has inspired several, often contradictory, modes of politics (or has been simply exploited by opportunistic politicians such as Milosevic (Emmert and Vucinic 1991, Humphreys 2013).

This sense of being a defender is something that the anthropologist Joel Halpern noted in his ethnographic work in rural Serbia in the 1950s; "The patriotism and pride exhibited by the Orasasi (occupants of the village that Halpern studied) are characteristics of all Serbs. They feel themselves to be much more that simple inhabitants of Serbia. They are the creators and defenders of their county. "We are Serbia". (Halpern 1955, 293)

The USA, The Shining City on the Hill

In her book The Wordy Shipmates, Sarah Vowell writes that "the country I live in is haunted by the Puritans' vision of themselves as chosen people, a beacon of righteousness that all others are to admire." She draws the strongest of connections between the Puritans and American adventures ever since, "we're here to help, whether you want our help or not". (Vowell 2006, 24/25)

Although one of the globe's model democracies, certainly in terms of durability and continuity, the US too has a culture of missionistic exceptionalism, albeit articulated in more moderate language. America's need to have a military presence in over 120 of the world's states has usually been voiced in the language of "security", its current preferred term is "leadership". During the Cold War, its sense of

civilizational struggle was salient; this has been re-forged during the War on Terror, (which has continued largely unchanged under Obama's two terms, but with slightly more moderate language than that of the Bush administrations). Although the US has a long history of overseas engagements, the huge permission offered by 9/11, the nightmare of mission creep called the War on Terror, was fueled by victimhood.

For decades American politicians pondered how to rid the country of "Vietnam syndrome". They need worry no longer; a huge historical trauma was decommissioned by another trauma, guilt over a brutal invasion (and humiliating defeat) was instantly forgotten by an attack of shocking scale and visibility. Important here is that fact that it allowed Americans, both ordinary citizens and political elites, to feel that their subsequent actions – invading first Afghanistan, then Iraq, while expanding drone and other bombing actions – is *defensive* and therefore justified. They are victims seeking justice, not aggressors. Because of its scale and huge diversity, it is difficult to generalize about the United States; almost any assertion can prove to be also its opposite. However I would suggest that there is a strong stain of religious language and sentiment – it's less clear if there is substantive belief behind it – in American public life. And for those who do not attach themselves to formal religious life, there is a highly developed culture of civic religion in the United States (see below for further discussion).

Poland, Christ among Nations

In his book, *Resentment in History,* Marc Ferro writes that Poland retains resentment that its sacrifices are not sufficiently appreciated in Christian Europe. Poland had, so the claim goes, saved Europe four times on different occasions: The first time by leading the defeat of the Ottomans during the Siege of Vienna, in 1683. He quotes the King of Poland from that time, Jean Sobiesky: "Here we are on the Danube, lamenting the loss of our horses and the ingratitude of those whom we saved". (Ferro 2010, 74). Not only had Poland saved Europe in 1683, it had saved Europe from the Bolsheviks in 1920, and during the Second World War Poland helped save Europe from the Nazis (*and* the Soviets) and then again from the Soviets again. The journalist Magda Jelonkiewicz (the grand-niece of a victim of the Katyn massacre) wrote that, "As children, we were taught that Poland's suffering would help to redeem the sins of the evil world. The idea of being a victim cemented us as a nation." (Jelonkiewicz 2010). The idea of Poland being a Christ among Nations has long existed, even the Marxist philosopher Leszek Kolakowski (1927-2009) cautiously subscribed to it: "One of the things most derided and mocked by twentieth-century Polish writers and thinkers was the idea of Polish messianism…it

depicted Poland as the 'Christ of nations' whose suffering and crucifixion would redeem mankind. This seemed a ridiculous, self-comforting, and self-compensating fantasy." (quoted in Tismaneau 1999, 59). One might agree, but Kolakowski continues:

> …but on closer inspection there may have been some truth in it. Poland, the first country to defeat the Red Army shortly after the Revolution, prevented Europe from falling victim to communism, and perhaps confirmed the Hegelian notion that in every historical form the seeds of its future demise can be discerned from the outset. Poland was the only country invaded by the allied armies of Hitler and Stalin; this invasion triggered the Second World War. It was the first country to fight the Third Reich and one of two occupied (with Yugoslavia) that continued armed resistance against the German invaders. After the war, under communist rule, it was the first country to develop a mass movement of criticism, ideologically articulate, which culminated in 1956 in the change of leadership and first appointment of a Communist Party leader without investure by Moscow, indeed in defiance of the Kremlin….It was the first country in which the communist ideology clearly and irreversibly died away. And the first in which a mass civic movement "Solidarnosc" emerged and swept like fire over the land in 1980, nearly destroying the communist state machinery. Poland was the first….. (quoted in Tismaneau 1999, 59)

As recently as 2006, members of the Polish Parliament have tried to have Jesus officially crowned King of Poland.[2]

Yet unlike the other four states mentioned here, Poland's exceptionalism is (at least at this stage in history) very different. In the past, its sense of victimhood has, as Ferro argued[3], fed into anti-Semitism, but now it seems largely sacrificial rather than vengeful. Poland has had territorial disputes (Danzig/Gdansk and Vilinius/Wilno), but these are largely resolved. Perhaps it is the positive direction of recent Polish history, emergence from Soviet influence, successful EU and NATO membership that

[2] "In December 2006…forty-six members of the Polish parliament – 10 percent of the lower house – submitted a bill seeking to proclaim Jesus Christ the king of Poland and to follow the path of the Virgin Mary, who was declared honorary queen of Poland in 1665" (see Juraj Buzalka, Nation and Religion, the Politics of Commemoration in South-East Poland, Halle Studies in the Anthropology of Eurasia, Halle, 2006)

[3] Speaking of the 1941 Jedwabne Pogrom (which was not carried out by the *Wehmacht* – local people murdered at least 300 Jews) Ferro writes: "Being taught that Jews had crucified Jesus was the first wound that these Poles had received in the early infancy. Passed on from generation to generation, it has aroused a desire for vengeance and that vengeance had finally taken place. "We were taught that in school...". Ferro, p.11.

has decommissioned Polish missionism? If this is accurate, then one must say that what might re-ignite is precisely the renewed expansionism of Putin's Russia.

Civic religion

In his *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said wrote that "Every society and official tradition defends itself against interferences with its sanctioned narratives; over time these acquire an almost theological status, with founding heroes, cherished ideas and values, national allegories having an inestimable effect in cultural and political life." (Said 1993, 380) What is meant by this "almost theological status" is worth dwelling upon. The term civic religion well describes public practices that seem to exist in a poorly-lit confusion of secular and sacred.

In this sense the gradual secularization of Western societies since the enlightenment has only been a partially-fulfilled project, despite what religious authors might believe. For example, the philosopher and practicing Roman Catholic, Charles Taylor can assert – with some obvious concern from his perspective – that "The presumption of unbelief has become the dominant one in more and more of these milieu and has achieved hegemony in certain crucial ones,…" (Taylor 2007, 13). This may be accurate in respect to some (though not all) institutions, but this is not the full picture. I fully agree with Mircea Eliade's assertion that:

> …the man who has made his choice in favor of a profane life never succeeds in completely doing away with religious behavior…even the most desacralized existence still preserves traces of a religious valorization of the world. (Eliade 1958, 23)

Civic religions may not be concerned with deities, but they do hold up their chosen narrative, heroes and events as revered, much in the manner of doctrinal religion. Much heritage and custom, particularly in the public/political sphere sees to preserve "religious valorization of the world" and long for the sacred. The sacred – as a category, familiar from Durkheim and elsewhere – is pervasive in human cultures. One particular aspect of the sacred is of interest here, this is, its unchallengeability. To be *unchallengeable* is an enviable status, and no culture – yet alone interested political agency – would be in a hurry to ditch it. It is no coincidence that the most valorized of events in Soviet/Russian history – the Great Patriotic War – is also being referred to in popular culture as the Sacred War. History, as Nikolay Koposov has memorably said, is a "hard currency" in Russia. Indeed the teaching of local

history *kradevedenie*, as Milena Benosvka-Sabkova argues, is both part of the religious revival in contemporary Russia and a vehicle for Putin's nationalism (Benosvka-Sabkova 2008, 8).

Israel and Victimhood

Of the cases examined here, a strong common element is victimhood. This is victimhood in the collective sense; not individual victims of crime or trauma, but rather a huge collective sense of wrongdoing. Such collectives are problematic, because not every single member of any group – least of all of countries containing tens, even hundreds, of millions of citizens – will react to events in a similar manner. Collective victimhood claims are necessarily constructs; they can indeed be based on external events, sudden attack, protracted warfare, or defeat, but they need to be formulated and articulated in terms and language people can easily identify with (and hopefully subscribe to).

The formulation and articulation of victimhood claims is a fascinating process and nowhere perhaps better than in Israel. For the contemporary observer, it seems obvious that Israel's governing national narrative – and strong victimhood claim – is the European Holocaust. However, as Amos Elon has argued, in the first years of its statehood, Israel's power elite rejected the Holocaust as an instructive narrative. Is seemed inappropriate to the pioneers and nation-builders to embrace passive victimhood; rather the heroic, military story Masada, was used as the young country's governing narrative. Peter Novick notes that the myth of Masada – a mass-suicide by Jewish rebels during an uprising against the Romans – had no place in Jewish culture for 1900 years (Novick 2000, 4). But when the State of Israel was founded, Masada became its foundational myth. Officers of the Israeli Defense Forces, then as now, that country's most cherished institution, were sworn in on the site of Masada, vowing "Masada will never fall again!" Indeed the archeologist responsible for the exploration of Masada, Yigael Yadin was the second Chief of Staff of the Israel Defense Forces (one of his replacements, the legendary Moshe Dayan, was a keen amateur archeologist). In his exhaustive study, Nachman Ben-Yehuda writes that:

> ...commanders wanted to use the Masada as a vehicle by which to instil what they felt were important values in their new recruits: a willingness to fight to the end, nonsurrender, *a renewed link to the past*, an identification with ancient Jewish warriors, a love of freedom, a willingness to sacrifice. (Ben-Yehuda 1995, 59 italics added)

Yet within two generations, Masada was replaced by another, more powerful narrative, the Holocaust. It must be stated that in the immediate post war years – when Masada was sanctioned as the national

narrative – the recent Holocaust was not publically mentioned or institutionalized in Israel. But this all changed, as Amos Elon wrote:

> By the later Fifties, the stunned silence about the Holocaust gave way to loquacious – often officially sponsored – national discussion of its effects. It because common to speak of the Holocaust as the central trauma affecting Israeli society. It would be impossible to exaggerate the effect on the process of nation building. (Elon 1993)

Today Masada is more of tourist site[4] than the centre of a heroic national story. Dormant for almost 2,000 years, the narrative was (very literally) dug up and placed into the centre of national political/cultural life, but discarded within two generations, replaced by another narrative that has a more useable value. This process is quite similar to the displacement of the Vietnam War by 9/11 in American national life, both allowed people to share a sense of collective political victimhood.

Political victims can be defined as individuals who feel a grievance for wrong not committed to them personally, but committed because they belong to a certain group. Furthermore the wrongs have been committed by a rival group and therefore the resentment is not only directed at the individuals who committed the wrong, but potentially the entire group (even if many, or most, individuals of the rival group are innocent of any wrongdoing). To extend this group dynamic; members of a victimized group – who have not personally suffered wrong – nonetheless identify as victims, secondary victims or even "surrogate victims", who do not belong to the group but identify with it. (LaCapra 2001)

The bracketing of *victim* with *innocent* is almost axiomatic, and indeed some writers on victimhood speak of the constant asymmetry of victim/perpetrator relations. This may be true in the study of crime but at the group level it is more problematic, victims may be blinded to injustice because of their own suffered injustice. We have already distinguished between *sacrificial victimhood* and *vengeful victimhood*. The latter is common to missionist exceptionalism, which will typically see its actions as defensive and even if brutal, as nonetheless fully justified. Victimhood, if acknowledged, is a powerful political weapon. So attractive is victimhood that LaCapra speaks of people who become surrogate victims, who over-identify with victims and even wish to belong to that group, illogical as that sounds.

[4] Furthermore, the large majority of people visiting Masada are increasingly non-Israelis. Ben-Yehuda, gives a figure of 646,000 non- Israelis visitors for the year 1996, as compared to only 77, 351 Israelis. Ben-Yehuda, 199.

This is the difference between mere defeat and acknowledged victimhood statues: it is very hard to imagine a "surrogate loser" but there are many willing surrogate victims. Victims often feel that ordinary restraints do not apply to them, this is equally true in international politics.

Conclusion

This paper has been an attempt to define missionist exceptionalism, use the term to define one aspect of Russian identity and explain some aspects of its foreign policy. This however has been done in a broad comparative context, arguing that missionist exceptionalism is certainly not unique to Russia and the other countries examined share certain elements. These include: a sense of victimhood, a religious core idea (or merging of nation with religion) although this may not articulate itself in traditional religious or nationalist language. Often this is articulated as civil religion, whether instead of, or alongside, professed religion. This is true of the US, Israel, Serbia, and Russia, all of which have a high culture of civic religion, as well as intrusions of formal religion into political life. There is typically one signal historical event, the most salient in each country's usable past, in these cases 9/11, the Holocaust, the Battle of Kosovo (and the large losses of both world wars), the Great Patriotic War, and if we are to include Poland, Katyn. All cases mentioned have a foreign policy predicament, and the enemy/rival groups is often another religion (War on Terror, Israeli/Arab conflict, Serbs standoff with Kosovo (and its previous wars against Croats and Bosniaks), Russia's war in Chechnya, though this confessional aspect is not a factor in Russia's actions in Ukraine). However, all these actions have been articulated as defensive; Russian *Katechon*, the noted sense of Serbs being "defenders and creators" of their country, American and Israeli actions in Iraq, Afghanistan, Gaza etc. There is often a sense of being misunderstood, even to the point of hatred by rivals; "Why do they hate us?" was one of the cries of pain following 9/11. There is often a sense of political paranoia as defined by Hofstadter, a sense of being surrounded by enemies, be it NATO in Russia's case, Arab states and Iran in Israel's, internationals terrorist and their supporters in the US case, often a corresponding preoccupation with internal disloyalty, even traitors. (Hofstadter 1966) For all these reasons, these polities plead exceptionalism; explicitly that the usual rules of international law and diplomacy do not apply. Applied to contemporary Russia we can see all of these elements.

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